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THE RALEIGH LECTURE ON HISTORY

(Founded by Sir Charles C. Wakefield, Bart., on the occasion  
of the Raleigh Tercentenary, Oct. 29, 1918)

# The Elizabethans and the Empire

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Fellow of the Academy

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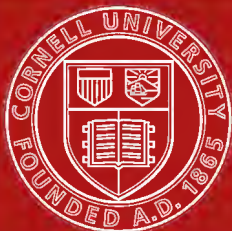
[*From the Proceedings of the British Academy, Vol. X*]

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# RALEIGH LECTURE ON HISTORY

## THE ELIZABETHANS AND THE EMPIRE

By A. F. POLLARD

Fellow of the Academy

*Read* November 2, 1921

SOME ten years ago, before the institution of this annual Raleigh lecture, there was founded at Oxford a club named after the same distinguished Elizabethan. The object of that club was to discuss, if not to solve, the domestic problems of the British Empire; and the adoption of Raleigh's name was due, partly no doubt to the fact that it had not already been misappropriated to party purposes or contaminated by any particular programme, but mainly, I suppose, to the idea that the last of the Elizabethans was the first of the builders of Greater Britain. At any rate, a series of popular biographies, collected under that title, begins with a life of Raleigh; and there is matter enough to connect Sir Walter with the British Empire, and to justify the use of this opportunity to inquire into the part which he and other Elizabethans played in laying the foundations of British dominion over the seas.

The result of our inquiry may be somewhat negative. 'If', says a competent critic of the particular biography to which I have referred, 'Raleigh was a builder of Greater Britain, the author has not shown it'<sup>1</sup>; and it is well enough known that at Elizabeth's death England possessed not a foot of land beyond the British seas. But builders may include architects, who must plan before the foundations are laid; and political edifices need thought and effort before they can take material form in expanse of territory. For one thing, the British Empire is founded on the waves, and the freedom of the seas was an indispensable condition of insular expansion. And deeper and broader than even that foundation

<sup>1</sup> Sir J. K. Laughton in *English Historical Review*, xiii. 363.

were the ideas and habits and customs of the people, to whom the freedom of the seas itself was but an opportunity, and the expansion of territory but a means, for extending the principles of political architecture which they had already begun to fashion and formulate in their island home. Spain possessed in 1603, after her conquest of Portugal, almost a monopoly of colonial empire, a far greater proportionate share of the earth's surface than is occupied by the British Empire to-day. It is not overseas but at home, not in the material terms of territory or of wealth, but in those of mind, that we must seek the causes which led to the shrinking of those dominions of Philip II and to the expansion of those of Queen Elizabeth. The New Spain, the New France, the New England, about which men were talking even before the Spanish Armada, would depend for their future weal or woe upon differences which already existed between old Spain, old France, and old England. 'The kingdom of heaven', says Bacon,<sup>1</sup> who dimly discerned the dawn in which he lived, 'is compared, not to any great kernel or nut, but to a grain of mustard seed, which is one of the least grains, but hath in it a property and spirit hastily to get up and spread. So there are States great in territory, and yet not apt to enlarge or command; and some that have but a small dimension of stem, and yet apt to be the foundations of great monarchies.'

It would not therefore follow that the Elizabethans did nothing to build up a British Empire because no empire was in sight in 1603. But had they empire in their mind? and, if so, did that visionary and implicit 'empire' bear the remotest resemblance to the actual British Empire as it grew from shadow into substance and from phantom into form? Here again, the answers to both these questions, if not negative, cannot be very positive. Elizabethans knew little of empire, and they hardly thought themselves British. Camden, indeed, being a great historian, was also among the prophets. For ten years, between 1575 and 1585, he devoted such leisure as his second mastership at Westminster School permitted, to studying the antiquities of England, Scotland, and Ireland; and the three realms achieved a prophetic union on the title-page of his '*Britannia, sive florentissimorum regnorum Angliae, Scotiae, Hiberniae et Insularum adiacentium chorographica descriptio*'. But Shakespeare is mere English; and 'when he speaks of Britons and British he always means the Celtic peoples of the island'.<sup>2</sup> Half a century earlier, Protector Somerset had proposed that English and Scots should alike

<sup>1</sup> *Essay, Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates.*

<sup>2</sup> *Proc. of the British Academy*, 1917-18, p. 404.



forswear and forget those names associated with centuries of strife, and adopt the old, indifferent name of Britons. But he, too, was born before his time, and wanted both more union and more liberty than his generation could abide. Throughout Elizabeth's reign it was doubtful whether Britain would ever become anything more than a geographical expression, and still more doubtful whether its unity would lead to a British Empire.

A British Empire was, indeed, far below the political horizon when, in 1558, Elizabeth succeeded to a bankrupt treasury, a debased coinage, a throne dependent upon Spanish support and papal jurisdiction, and a sceptre over a people who had lost their faith with the loss of Calais. Scotland was under a French administration, and Ireland—ever green with fresh problems of politics—would, lamented its Governor, join the Scots and the French. Even the Anglo-Irish of the exiguous Pale, he declared, grew weary and irked of English rule, and he begged for his recall; for, he said, 'it shall be more for the Queen's honour that we be called home by order than driven out with shame'.<sup>1</sup> The day was dark for British unity and independence: a 'bone between two dogs' was the ignominious analogy in which even Englishmen expressed the situation of their own distressful country between the rival monarchies of France and Spain; and (to be 'mere English' was not only Elizabeth's best claim to her subjects' loyalty, but the highest terms in which she could flatter their ambition.) Nationalism and not imperialism was her lodestar, and the earliest triumph of her reign was the eradication of papal jurisdiction and of the control which Spain had wielded over English policy.

Within a year, skill and circumstances had enabled her to expand the cry of 'England for the English' into one of 'Britain for the British'. John Knox returned from his exile at Geneva and put, it was written,<sup>2</sup> 'more life into his hearers than five hundred trumpets continually blustering'. Where he preached, altars fell to the ground and armies sprang into being; and an English fleet placed Elizabeth's veto on the re-conquest of Scotland in the interests of Mary Stuart, her French husband, and Roman Catholic religion. An important chapter in the history of religion has yet to be re-written in the language of sea-power. 'When', wrote Maitland of Lethington,<sup>3</sup> 'in the days of your princes Henry VIII and Edward VI, means were opened of amity betwixt both realms, was not at all times the

<sup>1</sup> *Cal. State Papers, Ireland, 1509-73*, pp. 141-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Foreign Calendar, 1558-9*, no. 710.

<sup>3</sup> *Cotton MS. (Brit. Museum), Caligula B. ix. 99.*

difference of religion the only stay they were not embraced? Did not the craft of the clergy and power of their adherents subvert the devices of the better sort? But now has God of His mercy removed the block forth out of the way; now is not their practice like to take place any more when we are to come to a conformity and profess the same religion as you.'

Religion had not been the only stay. 'What', asked a Scot of an English diplomatist in the days of the wooing of Mary Stuart by Edward VI,<sup>1</sup> 'would you say if your lad were a lass and our lass were a lad?' Husband and wife, according to Roman Law, which was received in Scotland, were one person, and that person was the husband. England and Scotland would become one realm, and that realm would be England. In Elizabeth's reign the trouble was not between a lad and a lass, but between two lasses; and identity of sex was an impediment to the marriage of true minds which even Shakespeare would admit. Making the large assumption of evangelical unity, the two realms might, perhaps, have one religion; but more certainly they had two queens, and unity on that ambiguous basis was beyond the wit, even of woman, to conceive. There could be no compounding of their difference, no compromise of their claims. Mary, the protégée first of France and then of Spain, lost first her throne on the field of battle and then her head on the scaffold, while the mere English Elizabeth throve to the end of her reign. But Mary's son succeeded to both the realms, while Elizabeth left no issue. 'The Queen of Scots', she moaned as she heard of the birth of the future James I, 'is mother of a fair son, and I am but a barren stock.'<sup>2</sup>

That was the natural cry of the flesh. The spirit of wisdom discerned in that poignant contrast the solution of the problem and the future unity of Great Britain; and Elizabeth never wavered in her resolve that James should be her successor. She had no desire, she said, to weave a winding-sheet before her face, and to create in a recognized heir a centre of disaffection; and her refusal to commit herself to James's succession was an obvious precaution to ensure his good behaviour. But the question was settled in her own mind. She never intended to marry; her marriage negotiations, which might have produced a rival to James, were merely diplomatic pawns with which she sometimes checked a king and sometimes took a queen; and tales of her hesitation on her death-bed about nominating a successor were the idlest gossip of the court. The rival pretensions of the house of Suffolk had been systematically dis-

<sup>1</sup> *Sadler State Papers*, ii. 560.

<sup>2</sup> Melville, *Memoirs*, 1683, p. 70.

countenanced, its scions disparaged, its party proscribed, and even its marriages annulled in order to prejudice its title and leave the field clear for James I. A royal frost had blighted their hopes, and no true Englishman gave a thought to the Infanta who claimed from John of Gaunt and Mary Stuart's bequest.

The Scottish James was alien enough. The embers of Border strife were not extinct, and the 'auld enemy', as England was still known north of the Tweed,<sup>1</sup> had enough of the old Adam to make it no slight sacrifice of self-esteem to stoop to conquer, to forget the ancient claims to suzerainty, the newer memories of victory at Flodden Field and Solway Moss and Pinkie Cleugh, and the foolish dreams of conquest, and to welcome as an English king the first Stuart who came to London not a prisoner of war. But pride precedes the fall of empires rather than their birth, and he that ruleth his spirit is a better builder of empire than he that taketh a city. The self-control and political judgement, which enabled Elizabethans to stomach James I, were auspicious for the magnanimity of British empire; and no one is entitled to greater credit than the Queen herself for refusing to stand in the way of a great and greater Britain. She had no authority to bequeath the crown, but she could determine the succession by abstaining from interference. In dying a Virgin Queen, she gave birth to the British Empire. *Bella gerant alii, tu, felix Austria, nube.* A happier empire than the Habsburg owed its initial union to the maiden meditations of its greatest queen; and Virginia was the proper name for Elizabeth's offspring overseas.

Great Britain was therefore in the sight and minds at least of some Elizabethans. But would the union of the crowns produce a British Empire, and what did 'empire' mean? Richard II, who, albeit a pale and ineffectual luminary, was as much the Morning Star of the New Monarchy as Wycliffe was of the Reformation, had proclaimed himself 'entire emperor' in England; and Henry VIII had embroidered the words and translated them into lurid action. 'This realm of England', says the Act of Appeals in 1533, 'is an empire', and even two Catholic Convocations were constrained or inspired to claim that England was 'an imperial see of itself'. Protector Somerset, in proposing a union of the two realms, had also suggested that the United Kingdom should be called the Empire, and its sovereign the Emperor, of Great Britain.<sup>2</sup> Here, perhaps, there is a faint

<sup>1</sup> Hodgkin, *Wardens of the Marches*, pp. 2, 32.

<sup>2</sup> Odet de Selve, *Corresp. Politique*, p. 269; Protector Somerset, *Epistle to the Scots*, E.E.T.S., 1872, pp. 241-2.

foreshadowing of the idea of sister nations in a common empire which Burke, our great philosopher of empire, formulated when he said: 'my idea of it is this: that an Empire is the aggregate of many States under one common head'.<sup>1</sup> But all that men meant as a rule to assert in the sixteenth century, when they talked about England or Britain being an empire, was its national independence of catholic jurisdiction, whether the spiritual jurisdiction of the Pope or the secular authority of the Holy Roman Emperor. Empire conveyed no idea of expansion into new worlds or of conquest in the old, and it implied no other conception of sovereignty than independent monarchy. Bacon has an essay 'Of Empire', in which he discusses 'the true temper of empire'. But the discussion has no reference to the birth or growth of a British Empire; and the essay, although it almost coins that disastrous phrase, 'the Balance of Power', consists mainly in advice to kings to be moderate in their ambitions and temperate in their government. For Bacon's counsel on 'empire', in anything like our sense of the word, we have to turn to essays bearing other titles, such as the severely practical one 'On Plantations' or the more suggestive essay on 'The True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates'. So, too, with the poets. Shakespeare's 'cutpurse of the empire' is simply the usurping king of Denmark

That from a shelf the precious diadem stole  
And put it in his pocket.

The nearest we get to our empire is in Campion's line

Of Neptune's empire let us sing:

and that approximation is due to Neptune rather than to empire.

But here we do light upon a real and vital link between Elizabethans and the Empire, and it leads us back to Raleigh. In a violent metaphor, which couples Arcadia with the sea and begs the question of the flock, the pastoral-minded Spenser calls his roving friend 'the Shepherd of the Ocean'. But it was no violence to historical truth when later ages saw in the shepherd of the ocean the prophet of the empire, or discovered a symbolical significance in the choice of Richard Hakluyt, the historian of 'The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffics, and Discoveries of the English Nation', to be the first spiritual pastor of Jamestown in Virginia.<sup>2</sup> For sea-power has ever been the secret of British empire; and it was the discovery of sea-power by the Tudors that changed the course of English history and the fortunes of the world.

<sup>1</sup> Burke, *Select Works*, ed. Payne, i. 193.

<sup>2</sup> Hakluyt, ed. Raleigh, xii. 86.

Writing at the close of the Lancastrian period, Chief Justice Fortescue laments that England is an island and therefore open to attack on every side.<sup>1</sup> His idea of insular security was unlimited liability to invasion. From over the sea had all her conquerors come, and all successful pretenders to the throne; and, casting about for comfort, Fortescue could find it—not in the Elizabethan sentiments which Shakespeare fathers on John of Gaunt,

in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands,

nor in those wooden walls which had to wait for Tudor genius to build—but only in the skill of English archers; just as in later days a similar mentality looked not to the navy, but lined our eastern coast with trenches and filled them with troops which might have been in France. Fortescue had the better case, for England hardly possessed a royal navy in his time, and the sea was no protection by itself. It was rather an open road for those to use who had the power; and England could not be safe at home, still less dream of empire over seas, until she could command the approaches to her shores and her exits to the world.

The history of that revolution in her position is not to be told as an incident in an hour's discourse. It should be as familiar to us as household words. But naval history is no part of our normal education. Hakluyt tells us how he urged upon Elizabeth's Lord High Admiral, upon Sir Robert Cecil, and on others, the establishment of a modest lectureship in London on the subject at £40 a year, and how Sir Francis Drake promised him £20 a year towards the stipend.<sup>2</sup> But the balance has never been forthcoming, and popular legends elucidate the history of sea-power as little as Robin Hood tales do the development of the constitution. The growth of England's command of the sea has little to do with miraculous storms which wrecked none but Spanish ships, nor with diminutive vessels, like the 'little Revenge', which were in truth the super-Dreadnoughts of their time. The Spanish Armada was a convoy of transports rather than a fleet of battleships; and when Drake singed the Spanish King's beard at Cadiz, he was not hurling an impudent insult at imposing dignity but demonstrating the effectiveness of naval guns which were almost as good as Nelson's at Trafalgar.<sup>3</sup> The significance of his ships was

<sup>1</sup> *Governance of England*, ed. Plummer, pp. 115, 138.

<sup>2</sup> Hakluyt, ed. Raleigh, xii. 80-1.

<sup>3</sup> Corbett, *Successors of Drake*, p. 430; G. Callender in *History*, v. 156.

not their size, but their design and build, the tactics with which they were handled, and the calibre of the guns they carried.

The evolution of those guns and men-of-war began in the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII, when the new peace was made by the New Monarchy after the Wars of the Roses, and men's minds were turned abroad by the expansion of Europe and the emergence of rival national States. With the establishment of domestic law and order, inland castles, those hard kernels of feudal franchise and centres of civil strife, romantic in their ruins but subversive in their strength, fell into abeyance and were replaced by peaceful Tudor mansions designed for the comfort of living and not for the need of defence. Men's gaze was riveted on the sea; expectation took the place of introspection; and monastic masonry was used to line the coast with castles. Then, almost suddenly, men's outlook took a leap into the future; a flash of insight showed that England's true defence lay not in castles on her coasts, but in far-flung wooden walls upon the sea; and never since has England known the real terrors of a frontier. It was those wooden walls which enabled Henry VIII to defy the conscience of Europe; it was for the sake of England's ships that Philip II was induced to marry Mary Tudor; and the Tudor navy was the sure shield, behind which Elizabeth made England English, Britain British, and undermined the Spanish Empire.

But the command of the sea, which Elizabeth's shipwrights, gunners, and seamen secured, was a diluted form of supremacy. Indeed, it never is and never can be absolute. The command of the sea is a phrase which may cover a whole morass of loose thinking. It is, like strength or weakness, an indefinite quantity capable of infinite variation. A century later, Sir Clowdisley Shovel, a true 'Tarpaulin' if there was one, declared that an admiral, who kept his fleet out later than October, ought to be 'shot'<sup>1</sup>; and Elizabeth, while she had twenty-nine capital ships in her royal navy, seldom kept more than two or three in commission. English command of the sea meant simply the individual superiority of the average English ship to that of any other nation, and not the continuous control of the seas by the organized fleets of an English government. There was little or no policing of the seas, where for the most part there were no Ten Commandments, and the Queen's writ did not run. The sea was no man's land, its freedom consisted in licence rather than liberty, and

<sup>1</sup> Corbett, *op. cit.*, p. 437. 'Tarpaulin' was a sobriquet which began to be applied to professional seamen during the Commonwealth; cf. Halifax on 'the present controversy between the *Gentlemen* and the *Tarpaulins*' in *A New Model at Sea*.

a 'nation of pirates' was a common description of the English by their unsuccessful rivals. But there were pirates and pirates. There were crowds of professional Ishmaelites of the sea, and Elizabeth hanged over a hundred of her own subjects for piracy in less than half her reign, testimony as much to the good intentions of her government as to the extent of the evil she failed to cure.<sup>1</sup> Others tempered piracy with plausibility or with patriotism. Many a trader had suffered real wrong, and reprisals were often the only means of retribution. As relations with Spain grew more and more strained, the Queen granted letters of marque with a liberal hand to all who professed a grudge against Philip II, and pirates were converted wholesale into patriots by royal commission. Instead of a national declaration of war, she granted endless licence to privateers.

Piracy was the form into which all oversea enterprise tended to sink or to revert. Even during the crisis of the Armada, the Lord High Admiral and Drake were momentarily lured into seeking booty instead of the enemy's destruction; and lesser men were continually being diverted from the legitimate objects of exploration, commerce, and colonization to the pursuit of speedier profits and safe returns. It was not easy to say where piracy ended and patriotism began; and some of the more scrupulous of Elizabeth's ministers declined their share in the profits of Drake's voyage round the world on the ground that he returned laden with the spoil of unarmed traders with whom England was officially at peace. The Queen herself was less high-minded or more high-spirited, but even she has been described as the earliest 'little Englander'.<sup>2</sup> There was not much expansion of England, at least in the form of English territory, in the minds of most of Elizabeth's sea-dogs; and the peace that was made with Spain at the end of the war did not transfer to England an acre of Spanish territory. There was not even a temporary occupation of Spanish colonies during the war; and, though the idea of seizing and holding strategic points in the West Indies was sometimes entertained,<sup>3</sup> and Drake took 2,000 men with him in 1585, even that, the best equipped and most powerful of his forays into the New World, accomplished little more than pillage. Spain was to be weakened and impoverished, but the Elizabethan builders of greater Britain hardly did more than threaten the foundations of other empires. 'All that had been imagined and attempted, at the cost of so many years of effort and so many men's lives', says the editor of Hakluyt,<sup>4</sup> 'was yet to do.

<sup>1</sup> Cheyney, *Hist. of England*, 1588-1603, p. 514.

<sup>2</sup> Corbett, *op. cit.*, p. 406.

<sup>3</sup> *Spanish Calendar*, 1586-1603, p. 600.

<sup>4</sup> Vol. xii, pp. 119-20.

No thoroughfare had been discovered by the North-East or the North-West. No English community had been established overseas. No gold-mine was in the possession of England. . . . So far the record is one of failure.'

Two explanations, at least, have been afforded of this apparent misfortune. Elizabeth had no army, and she was averse from territorial aggrandizement, even at the expense of Spain. 'Without a mobile military force capable of seconding the navy', writes our naval historian, 'it was impossible to carry the war further. . . . As it was, the end of the war saw Spain far more powerful on the sea than when she began. We had taught her the lesson of naval power, and she had learned it according to her lights. We had not learned ours.'<sup>1</sup> This lack of a standing army and a proper expeditionary force helps to explain Elizabeth's reluctance to embark upon a policy of conquest. She resolutely refused, in spite of invitations from abroad and pressure from councillors at home, to countenance an extension of her territorial sovereignty over Philip's revolting subjects in the Netherlands or Huguenots in La Rochelle; she even acquiesced in the permanent loss of Calais. For what was conquest worth without an army to maintain it? and Elizabeth was much too careful of her throne to tax her people with the maintenance of armies overseas. Naval warfare was feasible enough because it was waged for the most part by individual subjects on their own initiative and at their own expense.<sup>2</sup> But England had no army, in the modern sense, until the days of Oliver Cromwell. She did not like it then, and there is no reason to suppose that a standing army would have been more popular in the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

The truth is that England had sickened of military enterprise in the later stages of the Hundred Years' War; and though Henry V, the arch-militarist of England, was galvanized into a theatrical popularity by Shakespeare, no subsequent English statesman dreamt of following in his footsteps. Even Henry VIII was modest in his military ambitions; 'the English', remarks a French ambassador in 1539, 'have got out of the way of war'.<sup>3</sup> There was always the

<sup>1</sup> Corbett, *Successors of Drake*, pp. 408-10.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Don Guerau to Philip II in 1570, *Spanish Cal.* 1568-79, p. 250, 'The whole Channel from Falmouth to the Downs is infested. They assail every ship that passes, of whatever nation, and after capturing them equip them for their own purposes, by this means continually increasing their fleet, with the intention on the part of the Queen thus to make war on his majesty through these pirates without its costing her anything.'

<sup>3</sup> *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, xiv. i, p. 557; cf. Stubbs, *Lectures on Mediaeval and Modern History*, p. 279.



obligation, limited to the shires in which men lived, to help in keeping the peace and resisting invasion; but the few 'prest' men who served abroad were volunteers, whose 'prest' or 'imprest' was that advanced pay, which was given them on enlisting, and became familiar in later times as the king's shilling. Munitions and skill as well as the men were wanting. Archery was still in Elizabeth's reign the form of military exercise enjoined by statute upon the musters; and as late as 1596 an old soldier lamented the new-fangled preference of fire-arms to the long-bow, 'a weapon wherewith God hath naturally adorned us above and before all nations in the world', and could only account for it on the theory that God intended 'in his secret wisdom to scourge us for our sins'.<sup>1</sup> Whatever ideas of empire the Elizabethans had were not based on military science or ambition.

The literary evidence on the point is easily misquoted and misread. Bacon declares that 'above all, for empire and greatness it importeth most that a nation do profess arms as their principal honour, study, and occupation'; but he proceeds to instance Turkey and Spain as the only possessors of 'empire' in his day, and he can hardly have envisaged either as a model for British imitation. Poetic licence was less restrained than Bacon's legal caution, and Marlowe makes his dying Tamburlaine demand a map that he might

see how much  
Is left for me to conquer all the world.

But what else could one expect, in the way of an artistic exit, from a Tartar hero? Alexander the Great had stereotyped the pose of a dying conqueror, and even Marlowe's originality was not proof against the classical model. Drayton strikes the same note:

A thousand kingdoms will we seek from far,  
As many nations waste with civil war . . .  
And those unchristened kingdoms call our own  
Where scarce the name of England hath been known;

and this has been called 'imperial language'.<sup>2</sup> It is certainly crude enough to gratify the least regenerate Prussian. But it is unsafe to identify a dramatist either with his characters or with his audience as a whole; and the only safe assumption is that there was a gallery in the Shakespearian theatre as well as our own.

Nor can the more sober testimony of foreign statesmen be accepted

<sup>1</sup> Sir H. Knyvett, *Defence of the Realme*, pp. 17, 20-1.

<sup>2</sup> Hakluyt, xii, Pref. p. 34.

without discrimination. That the English were greedy of dominion was a common complaint of Spain; but the Spaniards, while good judges of imperial greed, were hardly impartial witnesses to the greed of other people. More weight might attach to the warning which the king of France addressed to the king of Denmark in 1560, that the English 'were marvellous greedy of dominion and desirous to enlarge the limits of their kingdom'.<sup>1</sup> But the warning was of the peril to Denmark 'if the whole monarchy of Britain came into English hands', and it conveyed an invitation to Denmark to assist France in re-establishing her dominion over Scotland.

More substantial testimony to imperial ambition may be found in Henry VII's commission to John Cabot to subjugate, occupy, and possess lands hitherto unknown to Christendom, and in the popular welcome which Cabot received on his return in 1497. 'Vast honour', writes a Venetian resident in England,<sup>2</sup> 'is paid him; he dresses in silk, and these English run after him like mad people, so that he can enlist as many of them as he pleases, and a number of our own rogues besides.' 'These same English', writes another Italian diplomatist to the Duke of Milan,<sup>3</sup> 'say that they could bring so many fish that this kingdom would have no further need of Iceland. . . . Before long they say, his Majesty will equip some ships, and in addition he will give them all the malefactors, and they will go to that country and form a colony. By means of this they hope to make London a more important mart for spices than Alexandria.' Cabot, he continues, was styled Admiral, and had bestowed an island on one of his companions. 'He has given another to his barber, a Genoese by birth, and both consider themselves counts, while the Admiral esteems himself at least a prince. I also believe that some poor Italian friars will go on this voyage, who have the promise of bishoprics. As I have made friends with the Admiral, I might have an archbishopric if I chose to go there, but I have reflected that the benefices which your Excellency reserves for me are safer.'

This contemporary account of the earliest English experiment in empire, with its references to popular enthusiasm, exploration and exploitation, fisheries and spices, commercial enterprise and military conquest, convict settlements and colonial bishoprics, illuminates most of the many-coloured threads out of which the garment of British empire was woven on the loom of time. It is a glimpse into the future, sufficient to show that the expansion of England was not, as

<sup>1</sup> *Foreign Calendar*, 1559-60, p. 516.

<sup>2</sup> *Venetian Calendar*, i, no. 752; Pollard, *Reign of Henry VII*, ii. 332.

<sup>3</sup> *Milanese Calendar*, i. 336-8.

has sometimes been supposed,<sup>1</sup> entirely the outcome of the Protestant Reformation, but not enough to indicate what the empire might have been, had, for instance, Drake remained a Roman Catholic or Philip II become a Protestant. For a century after Cabot's discovery of Newfoundland, his schemes lingered in the land of dreams, while England set her hand to the more immediate task of determining what she would be like herself before she aspired to reproduce and multiply her image overseas.

That image could not be cast in a Spanish mould. We had in Elizabeth's reign no conquerors like Cortes or Pizarro, because we had no class of professional soldiers. There could be no English Mexico or Peru, no superimposition of a dominant caste upon a subject population, and therefore no such mixture of races as produced the republics of Central and South America, partly no doubt because those countries were already more civilized and therefore more liable to political conquest than the ruder tribes of North America, but mainly because the English did not make that profession of arms 'as their principal honour, study, and occupation' which Bacon considered indispensable to empire. The professional soldiers of the sixteenth century were Swiss, German, Italian, or Spanish mercenaries; but arms in England were already being relegated to a serio-comic College which manufactured pedigrees and dealt in peaceful coats of armour.

It was otherwise in Spain, where racial and religious conflict with the Moors maintained the vigour of military expansion and of theological inquisition far into the colonial period. Indeed, that 800 years' war only ended with the conquest of Granada in the year that Columbus discovered the West Indies; and to Spaniards their conquest of the New World was but a continuation of their crusade against the infidels in the Old. The religious impulse, or at least the religious idea, was not entirely absent from the minds of English pioneers. Cabot had been commissioned to conquer only lands unknown to Christendom; and Englishmen contended that Alexander VI's bull had authorized the Spaniards, not to conquer but to convert the Indies.<sup>2</sup> Even Drayton's imperial language referred but to 'unchristened' kingdoms to be called our own; and John Davis attained a height of moral elevation in which he could ask: 'Are not we only set upon Mount Zion to give light to all the rest of the world?' But this was an atmosphere more suited for sky-pilots than

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Froude, *English Seamen*, p. 101, where he says that 'no interest had been aroused' by Cabot's discoveries.

<sup>2</sup> *Hatfield MSS.* ii. 230.

for Elizabethan seamen; and the 'sea-divinity', as Fuller terms it, of Hawkins and Drake was somewhat weak in pastoral theology. Neither the Church nor the Army provided the characteristic pioneer of the British Empire; he was less warlike than the soldier, more secular than the priest.

But the expansion of England in Elizabeth's reign consisted mainly in the expansion of the English mind, and 'empire' in the outlines of an aspiration; and it is clear that the basis of that expansion was the boundless curiosity which comes out alike in the Elizabethan drama and in Elizabethan exploration. 'The searching and unsatisfied spirits of the English', says the chronicler Stow, 'to the great glory of our nation, could not be contained within the banks of the Mediterranean or Levant Seas, but they passed far towards both the Arctic and the Antarctic poles, enlarging their trade into the West and East Indies.'<sup>1</sup> 'The great affection', writes Queen Elizabeth to the king of Cambaya, 'which our subjects have to visit the most distant places of the world, not without good will and intention to introduce the trade of merchandize of all nations whatsoever they can . . . is the cause that the bearer of this letter . . . jointly with those that be in his company . . . do repair to the borders and countries of your empire.'<sup>2</sup>

'And who', asks Daniel the poet, in 1601,

knows whither we may vent  
The treasure of our tongue? To what strange shores  
This gain of our best glory shall be sent  
To enrich unknowing nations with our stores?  
What worlds in th' yet unformed Occident  
May come refin'd with accents that are ours?

The reference to refined accents in the unformed Occident may sound a little optimistic, but optimism and imagination were the two pinions which winged the flight of enterprise to empire. Faith and hope, often enough frustrated, and not certainty or science, led men to seek uncharted seas and unknown worlds to put their girdle round the globe. But while poets could compass the ends of the earth on the wings of imagination, Willoughby and Chancellor, Gilbert and Davis and Drake, had to go down to the sea in ships, and ships could not be built by a stroke of the pen or on the financial proceeds of poetry or prose. Curiosity moved men's minds, but more material means were needed to transport their bodies; and the voyages of the explorers were financed by companies of traders and speculators who did not look for their reward in the next world, but in the discovery

<sup>1</sup> Cheyney, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

<sup>2</sup> Hakluyt, v. 450.

of quicker and safer routes to the other side of this. The heroic and romantic stories of the North-East and North-West passages, of journeys overland by Moscow or Damascus to Bokhara and the East, of Fitch's travels throughout India, of William Adams's residence in Japan, where he helped to build a Japanese navy and is annually commemorated to this day, have their duller background in the prosaic details of joint-stock companies, of lotteries to float colonial enterprise, of the suing of shareholders who had come in—as a correspondent remarks—‘when the Virginia business was at its highest’ and refused to pay up when, as Charles I puts it, they saw no ‘better fruit than tobacco and smoke’, with the consequent ‘danger to the bodies and manners of the English people through the excessive growth’ of ‘that contemptible weed’, or when they feared failure owing—to quote the words of a contemporary, which must surely be as old as the hills—to ‘the extreme beastly idleness of our nation . . . who will rather starve than be industrious’.<sup>1</sup>

But the finest of human minds are condemned to dwell in bodies more or less vile, and the British empire was not made of pure gold. If there was often the market behind the missionary, there were mean designs at the back of colonization. Distance has lent enchantment to the view; we have lost sight of Botany Bay in the Commonwealth of Australia, and the sordid aspects of more remote Elizabethan enterprise have been painted in fairer colours by the redeeming labours of later ages. The purpose of Elizabethan projects of colonization was less to reproduce desirable communities in new worlds than to expel undesirable elements from the old. These came under three main categories: dissidents, whether Roman Catholic or Puritan, from the established religion; the unemployed; and the criminal classes. Burghley once recommended Roman Catholic Ireland as an ideal resort—from the government's point of view—for Puritans of the preciser type.<sup>2</sup> North America was considered a suitable exile for Catholic recusants who were growing too numerous to be accommodated in Her Majesty's English prisons; and the disastrous voyage, in which Sir Philip Sidney was forbidden to sail and Sir Humphrey Gilbert lost his life, was planned to provide a retreat for Catholics, in which they would cease to trouble Elizabeth, but might become a thorn in the side of Philip II.

The unemployed and the criminal classes figure in an earlier scheme of Sir Humphrey Gilbert's; and his first project of a commonwealth overseas, drafted in 1572, contemplated the settle-

<sup>1</sup> *Colonial Calendar*, 1574-1660, pp. 13, 14, 25, 39, 125.

<sup>2</sup> *Domestic Calendar*, Addenda, 1566-79, p. 439.

ment there of 'such needy people of our country which now trouble the commonwealth; and through want here at home are enforced to commit outrageous offences, whereby they are daily consumed with the gallows'.<sup>1</sup> Eight years later an anonymous adviser of the government proposed that the Straits of Magellan should be seized and fortified, and that 'Clarke the pirate' should be sent out 'upon promise of pardon' with some 'condemned Englishmen and women in whom there may be found hope of amendment'.<sup>2</sup> In James I's reign the government was still considering a plan for emptying English prisons and relieving the poor by plantations,<sup>3</sup> in spite of Bacon's protest that 'it is a shameful and unblessed thing to take the scum of people and wicked condemned men to be the people with whom you plant . . . The people wherewith you plant ought to be gardeners, ploughmen, labourers, smiths, carpenters, joiners, fishermen, fowlers, with some few apothecaries, surgeons, cooks, and bakers.'<sup>4</sup>

Some progress towards this more desirable consummation was made in the reign of James I after the peace, but none in Elizabeth's. There had, indeed, been efforts, even by those who projected convict settlements, to procure more suitable colonists; but Gilbert's plans in Newfoundland and Raleigh's in Virginia were frustrated. The war, which grew out of trade, was fatal to colonization; and pioneering gave place to pillage. No idea of conquest had entered the minds of those who sought the North-East and North-West passages, or bore Elizabeth's letters of recommendation to the Tsar, the Sultan, the Great Mogul, or the Cham of Tartary. Discovery and peaceful commerce were their objects, and if they found the door barred they did not dream of war to force it open. But Philip II was less complaisant than Oriental despots, and Englishmen less disposed to acquiesce in their exclusion from markets which the long arm of their sea-power could invade. They disputed the title upon which Philip claimed his monopoly, and the Protestantism of Drake and Hawkins was grounded in their objections to a papal jurisdiction which had divided the New World between Spain and Portugal. Protestantism became the ally of commercial enterprise, and their union begat Elizabethan 'sea-divinity' and the slave-trade.

The slave-trade was the easiest wedge with which to force open the door of Spanish monopoly, because Spanish planters were as eager to buy the forbidden human goods as Hawkins was to sell; but the rival resolves of Philip II to keep it shut and of English traders to force it open inevitably led to war. The actual process was one by which

<sup>1</sup> Cheyney, p. 363.

<sup>2</sup> *State Papers*, Eliz. Dom. ccxix. 97.

<sup>3</sup> *Colonial Calendar*, 1574-1660, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Essay, Of Plantations*.

merchant ships armed themselves more and more heavily until they were indistinguishable in their build, their armament, and their conduct, from men-of-war; and a similar change came over our colonization. Instead of schemes of plantation we have plans to seize strategic points, instead of trade, piracy, instead of settlements of our own, attempts to conquer other peoples'; and overseas enterprise was swallowed up in war. Thus, too, the scene shifts from north to south, from temperate climes to torrid zones. From Gilbert's plans to colonize Newfoundland in the fifteen-seventies we pass to Raleigh's schemes in the disputed area of Virginia in the fifteen-eighties, and then still farther south in the 'nineties to attempts to conquer the Spanish Main. Raleigh himself personifies that perversion; he abandoned the colonization of Virginia to attempt the conquest of Guiana.

The war, for which this sacrifice was made, established England's command of the sea. 'All this country', writes a Spaniard from Panama in 1590, 'is in such extreme fear of the Englishmen our enemies that the like was never seen or heard of.'<sup>1</sup> A Venetian in 1597 refers to England's 'present lordship of the seas'<sup>2</sup>; and the Dutch Linschoten declares in 1591 that Englishmen have become 'lords and masters of the sea, and need care for no man'.<sup>3</sup> But their lordship had not enabled them to conquer Spanish colonies. That was freedom from encumbrance, a blessing in disguise; and so, too, was that absence of the necessary military force, which we are sure to lament so long as we limit our gaze to the sphere of military or even of naval operations. But, just as it would have fared ill with English liberty, had George III possessed the military force to reduce the American Colonies, so it would have fared even worse with the British Commonwealth of Nations, had Tudor autocracy controlled a standing army, and an irresponsible government been able to fashion after its own image New Englands across the sea. It was our good, and not our evil, fortune that postponed the expansion of England until we had learnt ourselves, and had taught to our rulers, the lesson of responsible government and some of the virtues of self-determination.

Recent rivals have giped at our 'ramshackle Empire'. Three centuries ago Spaniards were indignant that 'a company of voluntary and loose people'<sup>4</sup> should aspire to curb the haughtiness of Spanish monarchy in the Indies. There were even qualms about the looseness and irregularity of the colonists at the court of James I. The king found the 'popularness' of the Virginia Company's rule distressing.

<sup>1</sup> Hakluyt, x. 178.

<sup>2</sup> *Venetian Calendar*, 1597-1603, p. 265.

<sup>3</sup> Hakluyt, vii. 74.

<sup>4</sup> *Colonial Calendar*, 1574-1660, pp. 14, 17

Bacon urged that the government of the colony should be in the hands of a single person, with few counsellors, but with power to execute martial law<sup>1</sup>; and the Privy Council was recommended to proceed against those who had gone to New England 'in contempt of authority'.<sup>2</sup> Camden had tried to point the moral of Gilbert's and Raleigh's failures by remarking that it was more difficult than they thought, for individuals to found colonies.<sup>3</sup> The future of British empire did not, however, lie in the organized expeditions of bureaucratic governments, but in the untied hands of those who went out in contempt of authority. The logic of that contempt had been foreseen in Elizabeth's reign. 'Admit', cries the anonymous author of the project to seize Magellan's Straits, 'that we could not enjoy the same long, but that the English there would aspire to government of themselves.' Whatever Elizabethans lacked, they possessed a prophetic soul.

The capital of Virginia, the godchild of the last of the Tudors, was, indeed, named Jamestown after the first of the Stuarts, and James was an autocrat in his ideas of free monarchy and self-determination. But, while James was ruling without responsibility at home, at Jamestown the first-born child of the mother of parliaments saw the light. There was, it is true, no vision of an Imperial Conference nor of an empire founded in liberty, reared to equality, and composed of sister nations; but some things were being settled without which that empire could not have come to pass. Englishmen shied at a standing army which they could not control themselves, and it may be that their refusal to arm cost us an empire like that of Spain; but it gave us the empire we have to-day. Abstention from conquest left the field free for colonization, and the paucity of professional soldiers swelled the irregular ranks of the pioneers. British civilization overseas could not be a mere imposition on subject peoples, nor depend on garrisons and half-castes. The quality which made, and makes, unique the character of British empire is not 'dominion over palm and pine', still less its 'far-flung battle-line', but something in it, which is itself, yet makes for liberty in other peoples. 'Slavery', cried Burke, 'they can have anywhere. It is a weed that grows in every soil. They may have it from Spain, they may have it from Prussia. But freedom they can have from none but you . . . Deny them this participation of freedom, and you break the sole bond, which originally made, and must still preserve, the unity of the Empire'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Essay, Of Plantations.*

<sup>2</sup> *Colonial Calendar*, pp. 30, 63, 65.

<sup>3</sup> *Annales*, ed. Hearne, 1717, ii. 403.

<sup>4</sup> *Select Works*, ed. Payne, i. 232.





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